

The lure of the North and where it led me

by Candace Ward



Retiring Park Ranger Candace Ward (center) with her dynamic colleagues—Leah Eskelin (left) & Michelle Ostrowski (right) in front of Majesty the Moose (back). Credit: Refuge Staff Photo

I first experienced the Far North in 1960 on a family road trip up the Al-Can Highway from California to Alaska. My father fixed up the back seat of our Dodge sedan with a wooden bench creating a wide bunk. With pillows and blankets, my sister Pam and I had a roomy travel nest in an era before seat belts and children's car seats.

The rumbling of the gravel road lulled us to sleep for most of the trip. My parents woke us whenever they saw wildlife. We would kneel on our bench gazing out the window to spy our first bear and moose. My most vivid memory is stopping at Portage Glacier and lifting small floating ice bergs from the water. Pam and I built “play” ice sculptures until our hands were so numb we couldn't move them.

After this trip, I formed a fascination with northern lands. I loved sitting with my dad pouring over National Geographic maps planning our “future” adventures. My next one took quite a few years to realize. I was fortunate in 1972 to be a high school foreign ex-

change student to Norway. With its steep mountains and deep glacial fjords, Norway made a deep impression on me, especially on hiking outings identifying wildflowers or gathering wild berries. I definitely fell even more in love with the Northland after this experience.

In 1974 while in college, my husband Walter and I had an unparalleled opportunity to do a field internship in the then-proposed Lake Clark National Park. Working with the National Park Service Alaska Task Force, we set up food caches with hospitable bush families to resupply us on our 2½ month kayaking and hiking treks. The goal was to share our experience “recreating” in the proposed park, recommend future park boundaries, and to relay to the National Park Service what recommendations local bush residents had regarding the future park.

We kayaked the Tilikakila River from Summit Lake through Lake Clark to Nondalton and then hiked from the Kijik River to Telaquana Lake with a wonderful

stopover at Twin Lakes. We hiked and visited with the legendary Dick Proenneke, whose photographic work was instrumental in getting recognition that the Lake Clark area was truly a gem worthy of national park status.

We went on to work as backcountry rangers with the National Park Service at Dinosaur National Monument in Utah and Colorado, and then at Mt. McKinley (now Denali) National Park with Walter in law enforcement and me in visitor services. In the late 70's and early 80's, we also worked as rangers for the California State Park System in several coastal and redwood mountain parks. We kept looking for opportunities to return to Alaska on a permanent basis. Fortunately in 1984, Walter was hired by Alaska State Parks where he eventually became the first District Ranger for the Kenai River Special Management Area.

In early spring 1984, I began volunteering for Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. In May 1984, I lucked out when the Refuge hired me as a leader for the Youth Conservation Corp (YCC). YCC was an amazing way to experience and serve the Refuge and the community through youth service projects. Highlights included restoring the Seven Lakes Trail along Engineer Lake, clearing Refuge ski trails by Headquarters Lake, and building a series of docks to help canoeists access the Swanson River Canoe Trails.

A part time permanent field ranger position opened up for me in August 1984. After attending law enforcement training at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, I divided my time between field patrols of the Refuge and giving education and interpretation programs. Over the years, I transitioned out of law enforcement to full time management of the Refuge's Visitor Center and Environmental Education/Interpretation programs. I had the opportunity to grow these programs with the assistance of seasonal staff and, ultimately, was successful in adding two permanent staff positions to the Refuge Information/Education Program.

I am deeply grateful for a rare combination of wonderful staff I have worked with over the last 33 years, a series of encouraging supervisors, and a welcoming and supportive community. I have had the pleasure of supervising and coordinating the work of over 300 volunteers, interns and staff in the Refuge Information/Education Program. Each one has contributed to improving and growing our program to help visitors and local community members learn more about the importance of the Refuge and the wildlife it protects

as well as giving us "locals" a spectacular backyard in which to recreate.

I especially treasure the long term working relationships I have had with my permanent staff—Education Specialist Michelle Ostrowski and Park Ranger Leah Eskelin. Both Michelle and Leah started out at the Refuge as Student Conservation Association interns, then seasonal staff, and finally as permanent staff. I have worked with Michelle for 20 years and Leah for over 10 years.

Michelle and Leah are my two "right arms." We are a dynamic team that seeks to do our utmost for the Refuge, our community, and summer visitors. We host a variety of popular environmental education and interpretation programs and manage the Refuge Visitor Center and Environmental Education Center. We direct the work of summer seasonal staff members who work in the Visitor Center, give education/interpretation programs and patrol and do projects "in the field" on the Refuge.

I appreciate that over my 30-plus-year park ranger career at Kenai Refuge I have been allowed to grow and take on a wide variety of projects and responsibilities. One of my toughest challenges was the creation of our new Visitor Center which opened in May 2015. Our old center had served the community well for over 35 years. The new center with its welcoming lobby, spacious multi-purpose room, and state of the art exhibits is a wonderful attraction for visitors and a year-round benefit for our local residents. To have helped shepherd such an amazing legacy project is deeply gratifying.

Wow—and now it's time to retire. I look forward to outdoor adventures in Alaska and Outside with my husband Walter, family and friends. Like many retirees, I have "downsizing" projects of all sorts. I will enjoy staying connected to the Refuge now as a volunteer (which is how I started) helping with special projects and events. With the Refuge as my big backyard, I will treasure more free time to hike, canoe, and snowshoe—always appreciating its beauty and my great good fortune to have had such an exceptional career at this remarkable Refuge.

Candace Ward retires at the end of June 2017 after 33 years as a federal park ranger with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For the last 25 years, she had led the Refuge's Information/Education Program. Find more information at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.